

A Brief History of the Early Development of Gestalt Therapy in Slovakia

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Contents

1960— 1980: Early Years	2
1980—1990: Beginnings	2
1991	3
1991—London:	3
1991— Bošaca:	3
1991— Yenne:	3
1991— Dobrany:	4
1992—1998: Commitments	4
“Bootstrap training!”	7
1994 Metanoia workshop:	8
1998: Later developments	8
Dialog: Czech Gestalt Training Institute	8
Dialog: Slovak Gestalt Training Institute	9
The Slovak Gestalt Therapy Association	9

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1960—1980: Early Years

Karel Balcar visited the USA and brought back a modification of Fritz Perls' work to Czechoslovakia ("Boom-boom" therapy, according to George Rektor and Gabriela Linhardtová – but also powerful, effective and impressive according to George.)

Thanks to Karel Balcar, as a result of his presentations, Gestalt Therapy became more recognized in Czechoslovakia during the 1980's. There was some excitement and curiosity about this new phenomenon, Gestalt therapy. At that time, psychotherapy training was psychodynamic-oriented and hypnosis – psychoanalysis was politically suspect and illegal at that time.)

1980—1990: Beginnings

In the late 1980's Milana Kovanicová, a psychologist from Kosice, studied English lessons with a teacher in Kosice. A friend of this teacher who lived in London, invited Milana to visit England and that is where Milana met Richard Evans who was living nearby. The neighbors talked and Richard extended an invitation for two people from Czechoslovakia to come to a Gestalt Therapy Institute Los Angeles (GTILA) ¹workshop which was to be held in Italy at Rocca di Pappa in 1990.

Milana was one of the Czechoslovak participants and Jozef Hasto from Trencin recommended Tono Polak as the second psychologist to go to the workshop. At that point in time Tono was in asylum in Austria, preparing to return to Czechoslovakia for the first democratic election after the Soviet exit. Tono was informed by his former hospital chief about a scholarship that "some Englishman" had made an offer for two Czechoslovak therapists to join the GATLA's Summer Residential in Rocca di Pappa. Here Tono met Bob Resnick, Rita Resnick, Todd Burley, Richard Evans and others including myself.

¹ *Later Gestalt Associates Training Los Angeles (GATLA) in 1992*

1991

The following year, 1991, came to be a defining moment for the growth of Gestalt therapy in Czechoslovakia. With no money, but lots of charm, invitations and networking, Tono Polak invited trainers to come and teach Gestalt therapy in Czechoslovakia.

1991—London:

Meanwhile, after Rocca di Pappa in 1990, Richard Evans encouraged Tono to come to London for some training at Metanoia's highly regarded Gestalt training program. Tono went to London in February 1991 and met the director of the Metanoia Gestalt program Talia Bar-Yoseph Levine there. During this workshop, Tono invited Talia to give a workshop in Czechoslovakia.

1991—Bošaca:

Meanwhile, at Rocca di Pappa in 1990, Tono had also asked Todd, Rita and Bob if they would go to Czechoslovakia and do some training. Of course the three were happy to go and the first Gestalt training workshop was held in spring 1991 at Bošaca (near Trencin). Bob, Rita and Todd went to Bošaca in Czechoslovakia and worked *pro bono* with 30 participants and three awful translators. They presented theory for about 90 minutes to the whole group of 30 and then arranged three groups of 10 participants, and each of them rotated with each group. Finally, they also switched to using participants as translators – George Rektor, Tono Polak, Romana Krasulová and Gabriela Linhardtová a bit too. The group presented them with some very interesting artwork as a token of their appreciation. Gabriela Linhardtová came to the first workshop in Bošaca and was invited to be one of four who would go to Yenne.

1991—Yenne:

Bob, Rita and Todd invited the four who spoke some English to come to the GTILA (GATLA) summer program the following summer in France. George, Tono, Gabriela and Romana all came in Tono's old car.

They were very poor at that time. They had no money and stayed in Salzburg with Tono Polak's friends overnight and Romana Krasulová's cousin in Switzerland another night and bought three canisters of gasoline before leaving. It was cheaper to buy it at home, says Tono – but the Austrian police taxed them for the gasoline at the border anyway. Bob recalls how they were mesmerized by the cheese board at the end of the meals with 6—8 different cheeses. I remember George Rektor chasing me down every coffee break with a lot of theoretical questions. There was simply no-where to hide!

It seems that the workshops in London, Bošaca and Yenne encouraged the group to move ahead with planning for more training.

Richard Evans also recognized the possibilities and made an extremely generous offer at that time which influenced the destiny of Gestalt therapy in Czechoslovakia. He volunteered to sponsor three Gestalt therapy trainers to go to Czechoslovakia three times to provide workshops with theory and practice. When Richard Evans made his offer to finance this training, Talia maintained the administrative and academic responsibilities. The wonderful success of the first year led to an ongoing sponsorship by Richard to provide a comprehensive training program, with the goal to achieve a high standard of practice based on the UK requirements.

1991— Dobrany:

Before the Czechoslovak separation, in November 1991, Ria Verlinden from Multidimens (BE/NL) also did a Gestalt therapy workshop for the staff of the psychiatric hospital in Dobrany near Plzen. Later, a four-year systematic training program was started in 1993, and the Prague Gestalt Institute was founded in June 1994. There were trainers at this program from Multidimens and Norsk Gestalt Institute.

1992—1998: Commitments

In 1992, when I started coming to Czechoslovakia, Czech and Slovak relations were coming apart and the country and its society was going through a divisive time.

Around July 1992, Talia Bar-Yoseph Levine, Christine Sherman and I provided the original training for a number of visits but the composition of the initial trainers changed over time. For health reasons, Christine had to withdraw and Caro Kelly became a regular trainer. Todd Butler and Tony Glanville, from London, also attended as trainers – I think that Tony came twice.

Ownership of the group was a shared collaboration between the trainers and the participants. The group began as an open group of 30 – 32 people and then, after a few trainings and a long discussion, it was decided to close the group when it became clear that this training was going to require a long-term commitment for everyone involved. No sooner had we made that decision when there was a new issue. One person (no names!) decided that he very much wanted to be part of this new training and refused to leave the location until the group revisited their previous decision to close the group. After a morning of discussion, and more discussion, he was welcomed into the group and that was the first issue that I recall that we went through a group consensual decision-making process. The group remained closed after that episode.

I remember that the early meetings were filled with disbelief from the participants. They had all experienced trainers coming and going – never to return. When we actually returned every 3—4 months their disbelief changed and the work got going. The commitment of the participants was totally incredible. They worked so hard, studied and learned with so much curiosity – not just Gestalt therapy, but also English. One participant, realizing that the others were learning English, decided to take a dictionary and impressed us all one year by starting to speak from the vocabulary that she learned by reading her dictionary every night!

The check-in sessions were interesting and sometimes very hard. The very idea of being encouraged to share their feelings, needs and wants was a foreign (maybe subversive?) notion. There were some extremely long silences during the check-ins! This was a cultural shock both for the trainers and also for the participants. Another surprise was the usual hunt for food at lunchtime! There were many sandwich shops in town but, in the early 1990's at that time, they were all closed at lunch time! Such was

the social arrangements of the immediate post-independence period. Lunch became an intricate arrangement (for me at least, who likes to eat!).

I remember the first time I saw snow falling and briefly stopped my lecture to go outside and feel the fluffs of dampness touch my face. Everyone was now convinced that I was completely crazy!

In all, there were around 20 meetings of three days each over a seven-year period, held in various parts of the country – mostly western Slovakia but also in other parts of the country and in the Czech Republic a couple of times. The last visit was in July 1998 for a longer visit, examinations and farewells. Andy McEwen came from London as the external examiner. Richard Evans and his wife, Gaie, was also at that last training event. It is remarkable that the vast majority of participants actually completed the training. Romana Krasulová, Helena Fisherova, Nada Poláková, Gretka Velická, Tono Polak, Igor Obuch, George Rektor and Vlado Velicky completed the exams in 1998.

There was also a reunion in the Slovak High Tatras in 1999 for other exams. Gabriela Linhardtová, Majka Kvasničková, Klaudia Sankova, and L'uba Gallová passed these examinations and continued, along with the others, to become principal trainers in Gestalt therapy.

It is important to acknowledge that without the commitment, energy, planning and drive of Talia Bar-Yoseph Levine this program might not have been as successful as it has turned out to be. Talia became the *de facto* leader of the project, accountable to Richard Evans for its development and maintenance. She guided, cared, preserved, nurtured and nourished the project from the start to its end.

I continue to get enormous enjoyment when returning to Slovakia which I think of sometimes as my “second home.” After I emigrated to USA I had to first take a trip to the Slovak embassy in Washington and personally hand my visa application to someone behind a glass shield – a one-day airline round trip. They would not accept my visa application by mail – it had to be personally delivered! At some point in time I again needed to get a visa and when I complained about this round trip for personal

A brief history of the early development of Gestalt therapy in Slovakia

delivery, the person in charge at the Slovak visa section asked me if I wanted to become a Slovak citizen to save the time, money and frustration of applying for a visa for every visit! I thanked him for his kind offer, and explained that although I still had my South African passport I would not need a Slovak visa when I received my new passport.

We followed GPTI guidelines, which of course is the European standard. GPTI supported the training and at the end signed the diplomas. We covered field theory; dialogue; phenomenology; interruptions to contact; body work; principals of psychotherapy; experiment; contact; confluence – isolation; cycle of awareness; Organismic Self Regulation; group work; the paradoxical theory of change ... probably missed something... There was lots of practice and live supervision.

The structure of the work included a theory slot for everyone together, and then three smaller groups rotating each workshop to work with a different trainer; working in triads with trainers supervising live therapeutic work. As I recall, this practice with live supervision was a novel idea. Most psychotherapy training in Czechoslovakia had been theoretical up to that point and therapists' first exposure to "live" clients was only after they had completed their exam.

George Rektor, Romana Krasulová, Gabriela Linhardtová and Tono Polak attended GATLA Summer Residential Workshops for 6-7 years. Others from the first training group attended for shorter periods of time including Helena Fisherova and Igor Obuch. George Rektor is currently a fully recognized GATLA faculty trainer.

"Bootstrap training!"

To support the training there were "support-and-challenge" groups who were to meet between the trainings and at least one evening during training. They were reporting during the training in a creative fashion about what they did (if they did). This took care as best as possible for the lack of Gestalt-trained therapists and supervisors. I call this bootstrap training because everyone in the group helped each other to improve their knowledge and skills – "lifting themselves up with their own bootstraps." Every one of

the original participants, by being willing to commit and participate in the long training curriculum, played an important role in the eventual success of this program.

1994 Metanoia workshop:

Talia Bar-Yoseph Levine invited participants to join a Metanoia summer workshop. Talia recalls that it was in 1994 and Gretka Velická and Igor Obuch came by bus to Toscana. They took salami and bread from home and it took them 3 days to get there. Seems like a lot of salami and bread to take!

1998: Later developments

Dialog: Czech Gestalt Training Institute

Alongside the Prague Gestalt Therapy Institute which was founded in 1994; Tono Polak, George Rektor and Helena Fisherova have set up another Gestalt training institute called ***Dialog*** in the Czech Republic in 1998. They have since organized 6 training groups with more than 200 participants (136 finished; 66 in training now).

The Czech Dialog Institute and the Czech Gestalt Therapy Society have organized a very successful 2nd Czech and Slovak Gestalt Therapy Conference in Sepetná in October 2008, and they regularly give presentations at the Czech and Slovak Psychotherapeutic Conferences.

From the original four who initially attended the GATLA Trainings, George Rektor went on to become a Trainer Assistant and then a fully accredited faculty trainer at GATLA. Tono Polak has continued on to become a solid colleague and friend, training and teaching in Brno after moving to the Czech Republic when Czechoslovakia divided into two states. He organizes and does training there and leads international groups at conferences (e.g. In Spetses, Greece). In addition, he has been prolific in preparing translations of the Gestalt therapy basic literature – including Perls, Hefferline and Goodman's classic book "Gestalt Therapy," and books by Erv and Miriam Polster, Gary Yontef, Phil Brownell, Talia Bar-Yoseph Levine, and articles by Robert Resnick and others, etc. He has also contributed original chapters to books.

Dialog: Slovak Gestalt Training Institute

Gabriela Linhardtová , Klaudia Sankova, Majka Kvasničková, L'uba Gallová, Romana Krasulová, Gretka Velická, Igor Obuch and Vlado Velicky went on to establish ***Dialog***, the Gestalt Training Institute in Slovakia. Romana, Gretka, Igor and Vlado (later Nada Poláková replaced Romana) provided training to participants in the western part and Gabriela, Klaudia, Majka and L'uba in the eastern part of Slovakia. After a four-year break, I have had the pleasure and the opportunity to continue to provide annual training for the Institute from 2004 to the present after Gabriela invited me again to visit in 2003.

The first person to take on the initial role and responsibilities of setting up a Slovak training program was Vlado Velicky and Gretka Velická. Vlado did faithful service for ***Dialog***, the Slovak Training Institute, to place it on a solid foundation and to oversee the training standards, quality of training, and many of the confusing, contradictory and time-consuming administrative chores that accompany the setting up of a new organization.

After Vlado withdrew from his leadership position, Gabriela Linhardtová has been leading the Slovak Dialog Training Institute for a number of years now, dealing with many of the ongoing demands and dramas that such an organization and accreditation calls for. Gabriela will say more about the current training program and the wonderful people who give their time and expertise to this program that has evolved, including Klaudia, Majka, L'uba, Igor, Nada and Romana.

The Slovak Gestalt Therapy Association

Finally, I want to congratulate the organisers of this new Slovak Gestalt Association with my best wishes for success and many years of bringing people together in its support of the Slovak Gestalt community.

Thank you for giving me the opportunity to be here with you today.

With thanks to Bob Resnick, Gabriela Linhardtová, George Rektor, Tono Polak, Richard Evans, Dan Krejcar and Talia Bar-Yoseph Levine for their assistance and input. All errors are mine.

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